

EDITORIAL: Earmark politics

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Democrats made a big splash following the November election with their vow to change the way Congress does business.

But it took a little nudge from Republicans this week to get them to actually abide by their promise.

Basking in the high of controlling Congress for the first time in a decade, Democrats in January agreed to a host of reforms, including an effort to more clearly identify earmarks -- pork projects slipped into bills at the last minute with little or no scrutiny.

The Senate, for instance, approved legislation 98-0 just three months ago that would force earmarks to be clearly identified in documents backing up appropriations bills. The documents would also include the purpose of the earmark, the senator who requested the spending and the recipient of the money. All this information would be posted on the Internet.

Senators may be less inclined to spread around the bacon if watchdogs can easily identify and quantify their porcine tendencies.

The Senate bill, however, was OK'd as part of an ethics package that has yet to be passed by the House. And with the appropriations process getting started soon, "Senate Democrats had given no sign they would require changes to the earmarking process absent action on the ethics bill," The Associated Press reported.

Enter Republican Sens. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., and Jim DeMint, R-S.C., two members of the upper chamber who were battling pork spending long before Democrats realized they could seize the issue for political purposes.

On Tuesday, they pushed the matter on the Senate floor and eventually won a concession from Sen. Robert Byrd, the West Virginia Democrat who runs the Appropriations Committee. Sen. Byrd agreed that his committee would abide by the new, more restrictive earmark rules.

"The changes that we are making in the appropriations process will help to restore confidence in the Congress," Sen. Byrd said. "We will increase accountability and openness, while we also will work to substantially reduce the number of earmarks in legislation."

Good. Too bad he didn't seem so energized when nobody was looking.